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Counting her blessings...

By: M. English

Paula Deen was whipping up something decadent on the Food Network, and Barbara Hubbard was all ears. "I like the different things she makes," she smiles. "My favorite ... I think my favorite is her red velvet cake."

Respiratory problems keep Hubbard, 74, confined to a wheelchair at Meadow Springs Center for Post Acute Care in Plymouth Meeting these days. That means she doesn't get to cook the way she used to. If she could, she says, she'd be getting ready to fix the white vinegar and sugar-spiked collard greens and yellow turnips (mashed with potatoes and flavored with bacon grease) that were her usual contribution to Mother's Day dinners at daughter Donna Marie's house.

Her medical problems may keep her from her usual spot as guest of honor at Donna Marie's this weekend, but - holiday or not - Hubbard knows she can count on her children's Sunday visits, "and that's the kind of thing that really means something to a mother."

"I'm blessed," she says. "I love my children, and I dearly love my grandchildren. Being a mother can be a hard job. Today, there are so many things going on where children are not being raised properly. The world is just turned upside down ... but there are some things that just never change. With children, I think you need to give them as much time as you possibly can ... and love them with all your heart. Especially in the beginning. The beginning is what means so much.

"I lived with my grandmother from the time I was a baby, and I can remember a teacher of mine who told her, 'So many children just come up ... you've taken the time to raise Barbara.' I didn't understand that 'til later. That's just the way children are. They don't realize 'til later how blessed they are when they have good parents. But you don't do it so your children will praise you. What you hope for - the good that comes out of it is - you give them worthwhile things they can pass on to their children. A wise parent learns from the children, too."

Hubbard's own mother died within a week of her birth in Brooklyn's Kings County Hospital on Dec. 7, 1932 - "the same day as Pearl Harbor but nine years before" - and she was raised by maternal grandmother Gracia Woodbourne, mostly in Newark, N.J.

"My grandmother was a wonderful lady," Hubbard says. "She taught me to sing and read ... and she told me story after story about my parents and her family. She talked to me about all kinds of things, interesting things ... and she exposed me to so much. She liked musicals and movies, and she took me to those things as often as possible.

"My grandmother was raised on a farm, and she was a wonderful cook. I grew up during the Depression, and most of my grandmother's jobs were in big hotels, cooking. When she worked ... a lady stayed with us to take care of me because she only got to come home on weekends.

"But I remember a rocking chair in the kitchen and ... a great big iron stove that used wood or coal. And nights, after dinner, when she wasn't working ... or if she was in between jobs ... we'd sit in that chair, and my grandmother would read to me and tell me stories and talk to me.

When I got old enough I went to the library, but I always had a lot of books at home. People would give them to my grandmother for me when their own children outgrew them. And because I read - and was read to - so much, I'd get to know those stories word by word. It was a wonderful childhood."

Hubbard attended Newark public schools through sixth grade and spent seventh through 12th grade at boarding school in Bordentown, N.J. Along the way, she took voice lessons, sang in her church choir and aspired to a career in opera.

She also dreamed of teaching school, but following her marriage in Newark's 13th Avenue Presbyterian Church, Hubbard and husband Kenneth moved to West Philadelphia, where he had relatives, and she threw herself into raising children Donna Marie, Kethia Andrea, Gracia Carol and Eric Edward.

Not surprisingly, her grandmother's spirit was never far away.

"She was strict, old-fashioned," Hubbard says. "That was her way. But I always felt loved and safe, and I loved her. I tried to be like her with my own children. Of course, with children it's always different ... always a different era. That's why the loving them part is so important. That's something that doesn't change."